

Dr. Ross Brendle

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### Statue of Arisonoe and Priestesses of the Greek Hellenistic Period

There are many examples of sculptures and other artistic representations of priestesses in Ancient Greece, and each can tell us different things about the life these women led while they were alive. By analyzing one Hellenistic sculpture from the third century BCE., we can understand the duties and responsibilities she may have had. The *Statue of the Priestess Arisonoe*, from the Temple of Nemesis in Rhamnous gives insight into Arisonoe herself, as well as other priestesses of her time.

The *Statue of the Priestess Arisonoe* is a marble statue, standing at 1.62 meters tall. She is depicted with an idealized body and in a contrapposto pose, shifting her weight to be slightly on her right leg. Her arms are outstretched, with her right hand previously holding a phiale, being lost sometime after the discovery of the statue (Backe-Hansen 271). Her holding of a phiale is not unusual, as would have been commonly used for priestesses to make liquid offerings. She is wearing a chiton tunic, as is common in depictions of priestesses during the third and fourth centuries BCE in Greece, as well as throughout Asia Minor (Connelly 146). The full coverage of her body, along with the simple styling of her hair – a bun – shows the modesty commonly found in depictions of priestesses, and the idealization of her body fits with how women were typically portrayed at the time.

Ralf von den Hoff, in his description of the statue, remarks on the original inclusion of Arisonoe holding a phiale, saying that objects such as the phiale can be used to show general temple activities, as well as specific actions taken by the individuals themselves (Von den Hoff). Arisonoe's depiction with a phiale is likely a nod to the offerings that took place within the

temple the statue was found in, and, paired with her modest dress, depicts Aristonoe as a pious woman, devout to her goddess, who took her role as a priestess seriously. In a similar vein to religious dress of the modern day, her full coverage clothing could have been out of respect to Nemesis herself, or to the physical temple.

However, while her body and clothing may have been idealized and common in Hellenistic art, the artist chose to include much more detail in Aristonoe's face. Wendy Backe-Hansen describes her as, "...a matronly woman past the first bloom of youth..." (Backe-Hansen 271-72). This gives us information about Aristonoe herself, namely that she was an older woman, and had likely served in the temple for much of her life, and also information about what was seen as important enough to be depicted by the artist. The deliberate showcasing of Aristonoe's age, as well as some information we gain from reading the statue's inscription, could give us insight into the priestesses of Rhamnous in the third century in general.

While priestesses are often thought of as young women, and, more specifically, virgins, Aristonoe is neither of these. Her face shows signs of aging, such as eye bags, a slight double chin, and wrinkles. The inscription on the base of the statue tells us that it was dedicated by two of her sons, showing that not only was she not a youth, but she was also not a virgin while serving as a priestess. While many, if not most priestesses in ancient Greece would have needed to be virgins, it is clear that priestesses at Rhamnous did not need to meet this qualification (Backe-Hansen 269).

Aristonoe's lack of virginity is not the only detail about her, and other priestesses, that we can learn from her statue's inscription. By the way she is described, we gain a great deal of information about the social status and respect that priestesses had in Rhamnous. It was common in ancient Greece for women to be described by their relationship to men, such as their husband

or father, and while the *Statue of the Priestess Aristonoe* certainly follows this pattern, its inscription also described her in her own right. Backe-Hansen translates the entire inscription as follows: “Hierokles, son of Hieropoios of Rhamnous, / dedicated to Themis and Nemesis / [this statue of] his mother Aristonoe, / priestess of Nemesis, / daughter of Nikokratos of Rhamnous” (Backe-Hansen 271). While Aristonoe’s description is traditional in that it describes her as her father’s daughter, it also describes her as being a “priestess of Nemesis”, and a mother. We can assume that the inclusion of a personal title, in addition to basing her identity on her father, means that priestesses in Rhamnous were respected more than other women.

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By viewing the *Statue of the Priestess Aristonoe*, we can gather information about how priestesses were typically viewed in the Attic city of Rhamnous, as well as get an indication as to what some of their duties may have been. While Aristonoe’s idealized body appears similar to depictions of other women in ancient Greece, the aged appearance of her face shows that unlike many other Greek priestesses, those at Rhamnous may have often been older and more mature, sometimes with children of their own, as in Aristonoe’s case. The clothing she is wearing matches what is expected from depictions of priestesses, and gives off a sense of modesty. The inclusion

of a personal title in the statue's inscription shows that priestesses in Rhamnous were well-respected, moreso than other women at the time, who were typically defined only by their relationship to their fathers or husbands. While it is now missing, the statue's right hand was at one point holding a phiale, used for making liquid offerings, and gives a more grounded understanding of the duties expected from Aristonoe and other priestesses like her. Overall, the depiction of Aristonoe and its accompanying inscription gives the viewer a good understanding of the cultural attitude surrounding the priestesses at Rhamnous.

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